

Enfant Diabolique in International Cinema

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THE PRESENCE OF HORROR GENRE genre at the Singapore International Film Festival 1996 inspired these recollections:

John Carpenter's remake of the seminal *Village of the Damned* featured in this year's Singapore Festival of Arts All-Night Horrorthon, is a chilling account of what happens when a small community of sinister children, endowed with telepathic and destructive powers, gradually unfolds evil plans for world domination.

In this current age of contemporary film-making technology, the film's sound and special effects are superb, but that isn't what makes the film frightening. It is the notion of innocent, "helpless" children, rising above the domination that parents, teachers and adults at large have traditionally exerted over them, turning on the conventional authority figures, threatening them, violating them, and ultimately triumphing over them.

This is the theme of the *enfant diabolique*, or diabolical child, which has found expression and gained favour in numerous films made all over the world. It is a sub-category of the horror genre, and its lasting appeal lies in this massaging of a basic fear -- just like the fear of animals going berserk and turning on their masters, which was the platform for the Jaws-inspired disaster epics of the seventies.

This article presents and compares various films in which the theme of the "enfant diabolique" has been explored. One of the best-known titles in this category must surely be *The Omen* (together with the three sequels that it spawned). The purest exemplar of the diabolical kid is the devil child -- Satan incarnate, coming into the mortal world to conquer good and take over humanity. Gregory Peck gives one of his best performances in this film as the father, desperate to conceal from the rest of the world the fact that his terrible "offspring" isn't really his biological child at all. Billie Whitelaw makes a thoroughly convincing nanny who, unfortunately (or maybe fortunately for her) gets hung on a noose out from a balcony early in the film.

The *Exorcist*, by William Friedkin, takes the concept of *enfant diabolique* even further in visual terms. Horror fans remember the sight of Linda Blair vomiting large amount of slime, with her face peeling and disfigured, as she screams and speaks in the voice of her demonic possessor. Though the film is about twenty years old now, it still looks extremely convincing by modern technical standards and again its success is rooted in an all-too-plausible reality orientation: what if the darker side of one's religious beliefs actually takes form and menaces the domain of the living via the soul of a child.

Mario Bava's *Shock* is a fine example of the diabolical child theme executed simply, stylishly, and very frighteningly. Daria Nicolodi is the distraught mother who experiences increasingly traumatic hallucinations, and she gradually begins to suspect that her little boy is not all he seems. It turns out that there is a guilty secret in her past, surrounding her supposedly lost husband. One of the most surreal and memorable scenes in the film is when she trips and falls over a rake in the garden, and then sees the rake metamorphose into bloody hands clawing at her calf. Bava himself died shortly after making this film; it counts among his finest work in the genre.

There are long and interesting debates that rage over whether explicit horror is more effective than implicit horror (the use of psychological suspense). I personally feel that the latter works are better -- you tend to laugh rather than be scared when there is excessive bloodletting on the screen. A personal favourite in terms of the optimal use of implicit horror for effect is *The Changeling* in which George C. Scott plays a writer deciding to complete his work in a rambling old country house, only to discover that the house is inhabited by the restless spirit of a young boy who was murdered by his father because the boy's ill-health would not allow him to succeed the father in prominent business and political settings. I still remember seeing this film alone in Singapore at the old Odeon Theatre on North Bridge Road at midnight, and emerging from the cinema feeling uneasy!

Brian De Palma's *Carrie* has a somewhat older protagonist, a gawky teenage girl who is the laughing stock at her school prom until she unleashes the full force of her telekinetic powers of her schoolmates. Sissy Spacek

is as unforgettable in this role as Piper Laurie, who plays her zealot mother. Here is the *enfant diabolique* articulated with a twist; the suggestion is that upbringing, rather than nature or circumstances beyond one's control, is responsible for the young terror. Emotionally, too, this kind of film is very satisfying to anyone who can identify with the experience of being ridiculed or ostracised as an underdog.

Michael J. Fox takes the category further in *Teen Wolf*. This time, comedy is thrown in for good measure, and the thematic focus shifts from macabre youth seeking revenge to superhuman youth transforming basketball losers into champions. By the time this film came out, the "brat pack" genre was evolving with swift and varied expositions of teen angst. Strictly speaking, one might not classify *Teen Wolf* as a bona fide horror film, but it does offer an interesting extension of the *enfant diabolique* concept, and is quite entertaining at the same time.

There are many more examples, but suffice it to say that for as long as movies stay popular, horror will draw; and as long as that genre thrives, the *enfant diabolique* will continue to be explored, expounded, and evaluated in the medium of cinema. Sadly, *Village of the Damned*, was Christopher (Superman, Reeve's last film before his paralysing accident. Could the diabolical children in reel life have had an effect on real life? I wonder.

Author Information

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